

Boys and Girls

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Summary: A small, unimportant side story involving two overworked Marines, a disgruntled Pelican pilot, an annoying little kid, and few more interesting and familiar characters. Oneshot. WARNING: CONTAINS HALO 3 SPOILERS.

Boys and Girls

AN: I really have no idea why I wrote this. I guess I mainly wanted to write about a few characters I wished I included more stuff on, and that I just wanted to screw around for once. Anyways, enjoy, and if you didn't read the summary, beware of Halo 3 spoilers. YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED.

"_What in the hell happened here? First I get stuck on some alien planet where I take part in a revolution, and then I come back to find half of Africa glassed, the Navy a shadow of its former self, something about the Ark and Haloes, and the Master Chief being KIA, even with the lack credible evidence he was. Now is it me, or do any of you find anything incredibly ironic that he is the only Spartan EVER classified KIA while the rest of his buddies are still officially MIA? Damn, I need a drink."_

Major Karla Wellings, during her debriefing on Earth

Boys and Girls

****Crytech Main Weapons Manufacturing Facility**

> **Cairo, Egypt**

> **April 5, 2553****

"â€|as you can see, our main construction facilities here have remained relatively unscathed, even with the close proximity to the fighting and Ground Zero."

Williams nodded somewhat absentmindedly at the clerk's words as he looked at all of the automated machinery around him assembling what

would in hours become brand new Warthogs, Scorpion tanks, Hornets, and other UNSC vehicles. Even with the Human/Covenant War officially over, there were still stubborn Covenant Loyalists roaming the galaxy, and with the inherent chaos from Earth being attacked, some colonies and rebel groups, especially the few remaining Outer Colonies, could become a potential threat. Even though many of the draftees were sent home and the reserves were deactivated to help the reconstruction process, the UNSC still had a serious need for Marines and war material to ensure Earth's safety. Crytech's main factory in Cairo was one of the few manufacturing facilities that managed to avoid both destruction and major damage during the attack, and has thus become an important strategic resource for the UNSC.

"We are now currently operating at eighty two percent efficiency. The reason why it's so low is mainly due to the difficulty in obtaining the necessary raw materials as well as transporting it here, since much of Africa's infrastructure has been destroyed. Thankfully, the Marines have seen fit to lend us one of their Pelican transport wings to ferry supplies. Though time consuming, inefficient, and expensive, it gets the job done."

"Will this guy ever shut up?" Williams whispered to Tarin, who was standing next to him. "I mean, we can see that they're in working order."

"The Major wants us to be thorough." Tarin sighed. "She wants us to be absolutely sure that the execs running this place aren't cutting corners."

Tarin and Williams had been sent to Africa to tour a few of the remaining UNSC installations there as well as pay a quick visit to the war memorial at what was left New Mombasa. While both of them had no doubt that Karla could have and would have done the job herself, the UNSC high command, in all of its infinite wisdom, sent to her to the crater that was once Edwards Air Force Base to try and reestablish it. Cairo would be their final stop before finally being shipped back to Edwards to help with the reconstruction.

"Oh come on, I know you don't want to sit here and hear this draft dodger drone on about the subtleties of Warthog construction." Williams said.

"Since when did you get so assertive all of a sudden?" Tarin raised an eyebrow. "Those lieutenant bars really raise your confidence that much?"

"That, plus you're not the Major."

"Point." Tarin turned to the factory clerk. "Well then, that's good news. Now, would you mind if we, ah, examine the final product? The UNSC would certainly like to know that they are being provided quality materiel."

"Of course!" The clerk nodded. "Our warehouse is right this way."

****Crytech Warehouse D5****

"Well, contrary to all of my earlier suspicions, these guys seem legit." Tarin said after slamming one of the Warthog hoods closed.

"Doesn't look like there are any missing parts."

"The Warthogs over here are clean as well." Williams confirmed. "And from what I can tell, the Pelicans are at least in flyable condition."

"Good to hear." Tarin was about to make her way to the door when something at the far end of the warehouse caught her eye. "Whoa, hold on there."

"What?" Williams turned curiously.

Tarin made her way past several rows of Warthogs until she finally found what had caught her eye. It was a Warthog, but unlike any she had seen.

"Some kind of new combat model?" Williams asked when he saw it.

"Oh yeah, because every Warthog needs _cupholders_." Tarin snorted. "Because every time I get shot at, the first thing that comes to mind is whether I'm going to spill my coffee."

"Yeah, you got a point there."

The Warthog in question seemed to be a freak of nature as far as military combat vehicles were concerned. It was painted jet black and had a retractable canvas cover that offered protection to both the front and back row seats. The seats were all made of genuine leather, the really expensive kind found only in top of the line civilian vehicles, and were other features that weren't normally included on normal Warthogs.

"What in the hell is this thing?" Williams asked dumbfounded.

"Custom order, apparently." Tarin pointed to the identification sticker on the side of the vehicle. "Looks like somebody taking some time for some personal luxury."

"That's disgusting." Williams frowned. "We've got people starving in tent cities set up in the middle of the desert, and somebody still manages to find time for a pleasure cruise."

"Well, it's not our concern at any rate." Tarin signed off on the inspection order. "Let's go."

****Cairo, Egypt****

The drive from the Crytech factory to the Cairo airport was a very quiet and sobering one. While not as hard hit as some other cities like New Mombasa, Cairo still took its share of punishment from the war. The city was pockmarked from old fires and craters, not from war, but from the falling orbital debris from the countless destroyed warships and space stations. Such debris was falling all over the planet, and Tarin and Williams could still see the distant smoke trails and flashes of even more debris falling into the atmosphere. The extent of the damage these artificial asteroids caused was clearly evident in the cityscape around them. One of the nearby skyscrapers was sheared in half from a large piece of debris, making the remains of the building resemble a tuning fork. In a rather

twisted form of irony, rescue crews digging through the wreckage discovered that the offending piece of debris was a part of the MAC station named in the city's honor.

Besides falling objects from space, Cairo suffered from many other secondary after effects of the war. The once mighty Nile River was now a polluted mess, tainted with leaking reactor coolant, debris, all manner of toxic substances, and the rotting corpses of both human and Covenant that were still being fished out. The smoke and ash coming from the fires that resulted from the Covenant bombardment of New Mombasa hung over the city like a sickening, sooty mist, and refugees were pouring in by the thousands. With no place in the city to keep them, the UNSC was forced to erect massive tent cities to accommodate the massive numbers of homeless. There was also a tight military cordon around the camps, intercepting refugees and inspecting them for potential "bacterial infection".

However, despite all of these problems, the people of Cairo carried on with their lives as best they could. Tarin and Williams could clearly see people going to work and kids playing in the streets. Construction crews were working around the clock to repair the damage, and everybody generally wanted to fix the damage and get past this trying stage.

"Now that you think about it, Cairo isn't so bad." Williams said.

"Could've been worse. The Major could've sent us to Florida."

"Those poor bastards." Williams shook his head sadly.

"At least this place has electricity and running water." Tarin brought the Warthog to a stop to let a pack of kids pass, kicking along a Brute helmet like a soccer ball. "Can't say the same for the Major. Wonder how she's handling things."

"Like the sadistic slave driver she is. Do you know that she's got her own personal orderly? Can you believe that?" Williams responded, clearly annoyed.

"You sound _jealous_." Tarin smirked. "Missing your old job?"

"I might."

"You're overqualified anyways."

"Well thanks for the compliment." Williams sighed.

****Cairo Airport**
> ****Fifteen Minutes Later****

"What do you mean our flight is delayed?" Tarin asked the man in charge of the flight times.

"I'm sorry, Captain, but the time for your flight has been changed." The clerk shook his head. "With the current conditions, it's almost impossible to get accurate and reliable flight times, especially for international flights, and good luck trying to get off planet."

"Okay." Tarin sighed. "What's the next best flight?"

"Ummmâ€¦" The clerk tapped a few keys. "I do have a military supply convoy scheduled to leave tomorrow evening. They're headed to the same place you are anyways, so I'm sure you can hitch a ride with them."

"Thanks." Tarin grabbed the timetable printout and turned to Williams. "Let's see if the long distance phones are working and call the Major."

****Edwards Air Force Base, California****

If there was one thing that Karla could never get used to, it was heat. Spending most of her childhood life and military tours on rather cool and temperate areas, Karla had never really had to deal with severe temperature extremes that other Marine units had to face. She had her first taste of hot weather during her brief stint in New Mombasa, but that battle had hardly lasted a day so she never had a chance to notice the weather enough for it to bother her. However, it was a completely different story here in the deserts of southern California. For some unexplainable reason, what was left of High Command thought it would be fitting to send her of all people to oversee the reconstruction of Edwards Air Force Base. While Karla did not doubt the value of having a fully operational aircraft testing facility, she failed to see how she fit in the picture, as she was neither a construction nor an aerospace engineer. However, like every other assignment she had been given, she had learned to deal with it and any associated problems that might arise.

"Major, there's a call for you." Karla's official orderly, Corporal Murron entered her makeshift office.

"Tell the Colonel I'm too busy to deal with his crap right now. Exclude the part where I said crap." Karla shuffled through several stacks of blueprints and supply requests and was thankful that the mobile office was air conditioned. "I don't have the time to deal with him."

"A Captain Richards is on the line." Murron said.

"All right, hand it over." Karla took the phone from her orderly.

Corporal Franklin Murron was a pretty handy orderly, but honestly, Karla could think of nothing else of use for him. She was used to Williams carrying out all of her menial chores, even thought it wasn't really his job to. At least he knew how to drive a Warthog and fire a rifle. There was something about Murron that smacked of rear echelon. He would be the type of administrator the UNSC would need to run their peacetime operations, but never a frontline trooper. This was mainly why she kept Murron on base, since she couldn't imagine him being anywhere else. Besides, Williams was an infinitely better and more amusing orderly anyways.

"Major Wellings speaking." Karla still couldn't get quite used to that phrase. In just a couple of years she was a lowly lieutenant commanding a small platoon, and now she had an entire battalion ready to do her bidding.

"Major? This is Richards." Tarin replied. "I regret to inform you that our return flight has been delayed. We'll be coming back sometime tomorrow."

"You make it sound like it's a bad thing." Karla said as she scribbled her signature on several order forms.

"Isn't it, Major?"

"Well, think of it as an extra day of shore leave or something." Karla said lightly. "God knows, you and Williams of all people need one. Go enjoy the sights or something, because I'm expecting you two to fill out a crapload of paperwork when you get back."

"Uhhhh, yes ma'am."

Karla deactivated the phone and sighed. Lucky Tarin and Williams got to roam around freely in Cairo while she was stuck here pencil pushing. It almost made her wish that the Covenant were still around. Almost.

****Cairo****

"She basically said do whatever the hell we want." Tarin said simply when she got off the phone.

"Well, that can mean all sorts of things." Williams shrugged.

"Well well, if it isn't the hog drivers." A familiar, somewhat mean spirited voice said from behind.

"Barfbag!" Williams turned and recognized the Pelican pilot. "What are you doing here?"

"Not going home, if that's what you mean." Barfbag spat bitterly. "Can you believe the bullshit I have to go through?"

"What do you mean?" Tarin asked.

****Two Weeks Ago****

"What do you mean my discharge is on hold!?" Barfbag slammed his fists on the desk and glared at the clerk with murderous intent. "My tour of duty is over, which means I can leave the Marines, take my benefits, and go home!"

"It's not that simple, Mr. Ellis." The clerk said, eyeing Barfbag warily. "I've entered your ID number into the system, and it says that you've been killed action."

"You have to be fucking kidding me." Barfbag's jaw dropped. "I right here, goddamnit! You can see clearly that I'm not dead."

"Well, as far as the UNSC is concerned, you are." The clerk shrugged.

"Well, what the fuck am I supposed to do now?"

"You'll have to report back to your old unit until we can get this issue sorted out." The clerk tapped several keys on his console. "I

can give you a temporary ID number. In the meantime, your discharge is on hold until we can get to the bottom of this."

****Present****

"That sucks." Williams said, wincing at Barfbag's incredible bad luck.

"You're telling me. And that's not even the worst of it. My Pelican blew an engine coil two days ago, and I brought it here to Cairo because it had a working factory. You know, you'd think they'd have some extra engine coils since they build Pelicans here, but you know what?" Barfbag threw his hands into the air in anger. "They said they can't do it because they're not a certified repair center! I have to take to a service depot for it to be fixed, and do you know where the nearest service depot is? VIRGINIA! What the fuck do they expect me to do? Ford the fucking Atlantic Ocean on my dead Pelican?"

"I really don't know what to say." Tarin frowned. "I guess you're just going to have to roll with it like the rest of us."

"Roll with it?" Barfbag sighed. "I've been doing that for the five years I've been flying, and you know what I found out during my long career of crashing Pelicans?"

"What?" Williams asked.

"Think of every single ground theater you ever served in. Can you guess which service branch consistently suffers the highest mortality rate in any operation?" Barfbag pointed to himself. "Pelican pilots! There's something like a sixty to seventy percent mortality rate. It's not exactly a very encouraging thought to know that out your five Pelican flight, only two of you are coming back in one piece!"

"Um, excuse me, but do any of you happen to know where the quartermaster unit here is?" A quiet, slightly meek voice said. The Tarin, Williams, and Barfbag turned to see a rather small woman with shoulder length black hair and wearing a pilot suit.

"And you are?" Tarin asked.

"Oh! Sorry about that." The pilot straightened up and saluted. Even when standing erect, she was a head shorter than Tarin. "Flight Officer Claire Jones, callsign Vesper."

"Pelican pilot?" Williams asked.

"Nah, Hornet. That's why I'm here actually. I have to pick up a replacement."

"What happened? You get shot down or something?" Tarin raised an eyebrow.

"Oh no, nothing like that. It actually got stolen."

"Well, now I heard it all." Barfbag shook his head. "And they're just handing you a new one?"

"Well, it's a bit more complicated than that." Vesper smiled. "I was part of the Marine unit that got sent to track down the Prophet of Truth. We were storming this huge tower thingie, and then the Master Chief, the goddamn _Master Chief_ himself and asks if he can borrow my Hornet. I say yes, he takes it and blows up a bunch of Scarabs, and I never see the thing again!"

"What, you just let him take it?" Williams said incredulously.

"Well, what was I supposed to do?" Vesper rolled her eyes. "Say no to the _Master Chief_? Do you have any idea how stupid an idea that is? Plus it was sort of a heat of the moment thing. We were getting shot at, and it wasn't like he had time to say 'Ma'am, may I commandeer your vehicle so that I may use it to destroy those two enemy Scarabs?' We had some other things to worry about, like said Scarabs."

"She's got a point." Tarin nodded.

"So you're effectively stranded here until you can get a ride." Barfbag sighed.

"Well hey, what a coincidence." Williams said.

"That's right. Barfbag, how about you show Vesper where she needs to go? It's not like you've got anything else to do."

"I guess." Barfbag sighed. "Come on Vesper, I'll show you where to go. Hopefully you won't get screwed over like I did. By the way, the name's Barfbag."

"Is your flying really that bad?"

"As far as Pelican pilots go, probably."

"Hey, you're a Pelican pilot? You must have some serious balls flying those plasma magnets!"

At this point, both Barfbag and Vesper had walked out of hearing range of Tarin and Williams.

"That was kinda interesting." Williams said as he looked at both of the pilots disappear around the corner.

"Well, let's get out of here." Tarin sighed. "We might as well try to find someplace to stay for the night."

****Cairo Streets****

Like before, the drive was rather uneventful, if you ignored the signs of war damage on the city. Even though he was driving, Williams let his attention wander for a bit. He gazed out at the remnants of what used to be eastern Africa, which was glassed by invading Covenant forces. Why only that section of Africa was glassed, nobody knew or would say. Other than the Human/Covenant War Monument erected there, the vast majority of what many people have dubbed "The Dead Zone" or simply "The Zone" was strictly off limits to the public. Black armored Marines and ONI personnel roamed these areas and ruthlessly punished any trespassers they caught. There were rumors of

valuable artifacts and technology leftover from the Covenant invasion that were still intact and salvageable. While the validity of these rumors was questionable, this didn't stop some enterprising individuals from trying to sneak into the Zone to find a quick buck. Every day, dozens if not hundreds of people braved the desolate wasteland, searching for something whose origins couldn't be traced back to Earth.

On that note, Williams was quite surprised at how orderly everything was. On some of the outer colonies, the moment UNSC influence waned, even just a little, was enough to have rebels and dissidents run rampant. Here on Earth, however, people were used to UNSC rule and intended to keep things as normal as possible, which meant enforcing order on their own. Before the UNSC government even thought about reconstruction, volunteers were already forming small bands and groups to handle civic duties such as law enforcement, fire fighting, and health. Other than the usual looting and small riots, things were remarkable peaceful. Unfortunately, Williams could not foresee such fortuitous circumstances in the outer colonies, and suspected that would be where the Marines would be headed next.

"Pull over." Tarin said.

"What?"

"Just do it!"

Williams obeyed the order and swerved the Warthog to the side of the road. Tarin leapt out and made her way to a nearby alley. Williams followed suit and saw what Tarin had caught. It was a trio of men surrounding a boy who couldn't be more than fifteen.

"Hand it over, you little punk." One of the men said in a threatening tone. "I won't ask again."

"Hey now, you don't have to get hostile!" The boy grinned and saw Tarin entering the alley. "Yo, lady! Maybe you can give me a hand here?"

"Crap." Tarin cursed to herself when all three men turned and saw her, completely ruining the element of surprise.

She didn't even both waiting. With a combination of her self-learned hand-to-hand combat techniques and standard Marine close combat, she swiftly dispatched all three men. She quickly bent down, wrapped her arms around the first man's legs, and simply lifted, pulling the man's feet off the ground and causing him to fall on his back hard. The second man came and she grabbed his arm and used it as a lever to flip him down onto his back as well. She then elbowed the third man in the face, sending him stumbling back into the alley wall clutching a broken nose.

"C'mon kid, let's get out of here." Williams grabbed the boy and dragged him out of the alley. They both got into the Warthog and waited for Tarin to board before driving off again.

"Thanks for the help." The boy grinned as the Warthog made distance between them and the alley. "The name's Jules."

"Captain Richards." Tarin eye Jules carefully. "What was that little

scuffle there all about?"

"Just a bunch of thugs, I guess." Jules shrugged. "But the way you took them out was awesome! Do the Marines teach you those moves?"

"Some of them, yeah." Tarin nodded. "So we'll drop you off anywhere you want. Where do you live?"

"Uh, not really anywhere, if that's what you mean." Jules shrugged. "Refugee."

"Great." Tarin sighed. "I really don't want to deal with those camp guards."

"You can just drop me off here, you know."

"What, so you can get beaten up again? Not while I'm here." Tarin shook her head.

"You know, we could an eye on him, for the night anyways." Williams suggested.

"Are you crazy? Do you know how absurd that is?" Tarin gaped.

"Cool! I always wanted to hang out with Marines!" Jules grinned brightly.

"Come on, Tarin. You gonna say no to that face?" Williams smiled.

"Fine, whatever." Tarin sighed. "All right kid, while we're on the way the hotel, mind telling us your story?"

"Well, it's pretty much the same as the rest of the refugees here." Jules said. "Though I doubt you Marines really spend any time with the refugees anyways. I'm sure you've got better things to do in your time."

"Humor me." Tarin responded simply.

"Wellâ€¦" Jules leaned back in his seat. "Me and my family were once proud denizens of the city of Voi. Basically a stone's throw from Mombasa. Anyways, the minute the Covenant start pouring down into Mombasa, everybody in Voi starts freaking out. So then, the streets and rail lines are clogged with people trying to get as far from the place as possible. My parents manage to get me a spot on the last train out and promise to meet me in Cairo, but that was a loooong time ago. I don't even know where they are. They could be in one of the refugee camps, another city, or even dead for all I know."

"That's pretty harsh." Williams winced.

"Get used to it." Jules replied. "It's pretty much happened to everybody here."

"Unfortunately, there's little we can do about that."

"Yeah, I expected you to say that." Jules spat. "I've tried getting

the other Marines around here to help me, but they're all 'rules this' and 'regulation that'. None of them give a damn about us."

"Hey, now that's not fair." Williams frowned as he made a slow turn around a corner. "We Marines can be laid back and fun-loving."

"We are?" Tarin cocked her head curiously.

"Ah, well, back when the Major was a considerably lower rank, we used to do some pretty crazy things in our off time." Williams gave a sloppy grin. "We sometimes surveyed battlefields and tried to find the craziest places we thought we could jump a Warthog."

"_Awesome!_" Jules' eyes widened. "I didn't know you could do stuff like that!"

"Idiots." Tarin shook her head.

"Yeah, well, we Marines aren't all cold, mindless killing machines." Williams sniffed as he pressed the accelerator down a little more. "We can be fun-loving and reckless when we want to. Hell, this is the perfect opportunity."

"You know, I'm wondering why you're suddenly so gung-ho about everything." Tarin was honestly surprised at how much enthusiasm Williams had for breaking the rules now that he had an entire ocean between him and the Major. Was he like this before they got stuck together? "Does being away from the Major really affect you that much?"

"You cannot believe how good it is not to have somebody two or three ranks above you around." Williams grinned boyishly. "Come on. What was the _one_ thing that you always wanted to do?"

"Fire a gun!" Jules said excitedly.

"Sorry, no kids allowed." Williams shrugged and smiled. "Enlist in the Marines if you want the chance."

"I don't know about thisâ€¦" Tarin said skeptically.

"Nobody will ever know, and I doubt the Major would complain."

"In that caseâ€¦" Tarin finally cracked a childish grin. She'd play along with this little scheme. "Alright. Let's cause some mayhem."

"Sweet." Williams smiled and turned to Jules. "Now you'll get to see when irresponsible adults like us get much more authority than we should."

"Cool!"

"We need a sweet ride then." Williams declared. "Not a piece of junk like this. We need a _real_ machine, preferably high performance and untested."

"Oh, I've got an idea in mind." Tarin grinned.

****Crytech Warehouse D5****

For a contractor tasked with assembling large amounts of military equipment and hardware, the Crytech facility had rather abhorrent security. The few guards that could be seen on patrol didn't really pay much attention to their surroundings, and tended to stay inside their warm guardhouses rather than patrol set routes around the premises. The electronic security measures were placed just as sparsely as the guards and were outdated by the magnitude of at least a decade or two. With these conditions, it was rather simple for two Marines and a boy to break in undetected, especially if the Marines had been to the facility before and the boy had a knack for picking locks and fooling alarms.

"Something tells me you've known how to do that sort of stuff for a while now, even before the battle." Tarin pointed out. Jules definitely had a bit of a bad streak with him. How bad, Tarin couldn't tell.

"You can pick up a lot more things in Voi than just cargo crates." Jules leapt into the driver's seat of one of the parked Warthogs and played with the controls a bit. "It's all pretty simple stuff, really."

"I'm sure." Tarin wrote Jules off as a classic, though smart delinquent and turned to Williams. "Well? How's it going?"

"Didn't even have to pop the hood." Williams emerged from the darkness, jingling a small pack of keys in his hand. "The manager was kind enough to leave this in the ignition."

Tarin, Williams, and Jules then looked at the customized Warthog. Something about the vehicle just screamed to have somebody push it to its physical limits. Williams ran a hand across the hood and then the all leather seats, savoring the feel. "Well Tarin, enjoy this moment, because this is probably the only time you'll ever get this close to sheer royalty."

"I don't know, I still have some bad feelings about this."

"Just get in the seat." Williams turned the ignition and the Warthog roared to life.

****Cairo****

Now, in normal times, most people would have noticed and taken offense to the sound of a Warthog barreling down the streets at speeds exceeding a hundred miles per hour. However, because of the postwar conditions, large swathes of Cairo were designated off limits to refugees and squatters like factory complexes and damaged areas of the city. As a result, there were a fair amount of empty streets and obstacles for a band of jokesters to rampage around.

The customized Warthog ran like a dream. Its performance was better than any normal Warthog which included speed, acceleration, and handling. Even going at triple digit speeds, Williams was able to negotiate quick swerves and sharp turns without flipping the vehicle. Other times he'd just ride over whatever obstacle was in the road, knocking it aside or letting the Warthog sail through the air for a

few seconds.

"Still have bad feelings?" Williams asked.

"I have to admit, it's really exhilarating." Tarin smiled as Williams swerved off the road to knock a street sign over. "I'm feeling that we're not putting this up to its full use."

"We can try upgrading to lightposts."

"I've got a better idea." Jules leaned forward from the backseat. "You guys ever seen the Pyramids?"

****Pyramids of Giza****

"Well, I always wanted to see the Great Pyramids, but I never thought I'd be doing this." Tarin glanced at the towering stone structures that dominated the landscape.

Jules pointed to the closest pyramid. "That's the biggest one. The other two are small fries compared to it."

"Alright, let's do this then!" Williams gunned the and the Warthog sped forward. Everybody braced themselves as the massive front tires slammed into the stone structure and began pulling the vehicle up and over the massive stone blocks that made up the structure. The ride was bone jarring as the Warthog negotiated the rough, uneven surface, but it wasn't much different from off-road terrain. Williams kept the engine and the vehicle going until they crested the top of the pyramid.

Like a rollercoaster ride, the Warthog teetered precariously on top of the massive structure, trying to decide when to finally tip over and plummet down back to the ground. One stomp of the accelerator and the Warthog was over the top and barreling down the opposite side of the pyramid at breakneck speed. The bumpy ride and high speeds meant that the Warthog would bounce in the air for several seconds at a time, and there was hardly any time where all four wheels would be in contact with the stones. Finally, as they neared the bottom, the Warthog hit a stone with a bit too much speed, sending the Warthog flying through the air. Despite Williams' best efforts, the Warthog flipped and hit the ground on its back. Thankfully, the desert sand was soft and cushioned the fall, and the Warthog's roll cage and seatbelts prevented any serious injury.

Now, most people, when caught in a situation like this, would have probably panicked or be frightened out of their wits. However, for a pair of Marines and a refugee who faced death at every turn at the hands of the Covenant and countless other dangers, the absurdity of dying in a freak Warthog flipping accident was just too much. All three occupants spent the next few seconds laughing like a bunch of stupid kids.

"Okay." Tarin said, wiping a tear from her eye. "I think we should get this Warthog back on its wheels. I really don't want to get stranded in the desert at night."

"Right." Williams unhooked his safety belt, cursed as he fell a few inches into the soft sand beneath. He managed to crawl out and brushed all the sand out of his hair and eyes. He then helped pull

Tarin and Jules out of the mess. "I guess we should flip this thing over then."

"Isn't a Warthog a littleâ€¦ heavy?" Jules asked as he gazed at the upside down vehicle.

"Eh, Warthogs flip all the time." Tarin said matter-of-factly. "Nobody ever talks about it, but it's just something that happens. Besides, there's a bit of a trick to it."

"What trick?" Jules said curiously.

"The same trick the Egyptians used to build that pyramid. Sheer brute strength." Williams said simply.

Both Tarin and Williams walked to the side of the Warthog, bent down, and tried to get a grip on the vehicle. "Remember, lift with your legs, not your back." Williams added.

"We all know that." Tarin and Williams both grunted as they lifted the Warthog. Somehow, the Warthog inexplicably righted itself.

"Damn, that's way harder without the Major around to help." Tarin flopped down onto the sand in exhaustion.

"Got that right." Williams flopped onto the sand right next to Tarin.

"I don't even want to think about how you two did that." Jules said as he too laid down on the sand.

"Trust me, Jules, it happens more often than you think." Williams laughed. "Damn things would keep flipping over because newbie drivers would take tight turns and then fishtail out of control, or the thing goes airborne and flips over like you saw just now. Had to learn how to flip 'em back ourselves, since we couldn't always rely on the convenience of a Spartan doing it for us."

"I guess not."

"Huh, stars are pretty beautiful tonight." Tarin stared at the vast expanse of glittering jewels. Being from a heavily forested world, Tarin had never actually seen the sky that often. Truth be told, she nearly wet herself in fear the first time she looked up and didn't see the comforting canopy of branches and leaves above her head. "Hey, Williams, when was the first time you looked at the stars?"

"Huh?" Williams looked at Tarin curiously, not understanding the question.

"Sorry. Let me rephrase that." Tarin laughed. "When have you just looked at the stars? You know, you just look up and realize for the first time that there's just something much larger than you out there."

"Well, if you put it that way, probably my first combat mission." Williams sighed. "Me and Major got our Warthog stuck in a ravine, and there was nowhere to look but while we waited for pickup." He smiled

and raised his arm to cover up some of the stars from view. "The Major, she'd have this weird habit where before we go planetside, she'd study the constellations so she'd always know where her home planet was in the sky."

"Huh." Tarin nodded and turned to Jules. "So, how about you, kid?"

"I guess right now." Jules shrugged. "I've always been told that there was nothing but trouble up there, but it would never reach Earth. Everybody was so confident that everything was fine, they just blinded themselves to the dangers out there. When the first Covenant ships showed up, everybody panicked. Suffice to say, I was a little more worried trying to live through the day than looking up at the sky, but I do admit, without all the lights, it's a whole lot prettier than before."

"All right, your turn, Captain." Williams winked at Tarin.

"Well." Tarin gave one of her rare, genuine smiles, though Williams could see quite a bit of sorrow hidden behind it. "I was six at the time, back on my home planet before it was glassed. My parents brought me along on a hike to survey some logging territory when we got delayed and it got dark before we could get back. My dad couldn't navigate with any of his equipment, so he opted to find a clearing and navigate by the stars. Now, I was only six, mind you, and I spent those six years under trees thick enough to block out the sun. The first time I saw open sky, it felt like I was going to be swallowed up. I can remember crying and feeling really dizzy because it seemed as if the sky just kept going up and up. I tried to forget that experience, but I never could." Tarin stared at the sky sadly. "Now, I'm glad I didn't."

"Hah, you mean you have no qualms about knifing Brutes, but you get scared shitless just looking at the sky?" Williams whistled. "You sure are a basket case, Tarin."

"Shut up." Tarin said, quietly noting that Williams had called her by name rather than rank.

"Hey, I've been wondering." Jules asked. "What's the deal between you two? You both seem kinda close. Are you in some kind of relationship or something?"

Tarin then sat up with a rather fiendish look on her face. "Do you want to find out?"

"Uh... no thanks." Jules responded, clearly intimidated.

"It's getting _real_ late." Tarin glanced at her watch and grimaced. "Inept as they are, the security guys at the factory are eventually going to notice that their prize Warthog is missing."

"Don't worry, I've got it covered." Williams grinned.

****Crytech Corporate Office Parking Lot B****

The large, open parking lot of the Crytech Corporate Office proved to be a perfect place to perform the final Warthog ritual that Tarin and Williams had in mind. However, Williams insisted that before they

start, he would try something he always wanted to do.

"I am going to try to perform the famed Triple Reverse Flying Dragon Donut." Williams declared proudly as he revved the Warthog.

"What the hell kind of driving maneuver is that?" Tarin said, dumbfounded.

"_I don't know!_" Williams' smile only seemed to widen. "You might want to keep your distance."

As Williams prepared himself for the braindead stunt, Tarin grabbed Jules and made sure that the both of them were a safe distance from the vehicle. Williams revved the engine and the Warthog took off, tires squealing on the pavement. Once he reached the desired speed, he hit the brakes and put the Warthog into a dazzling spin and left circles of burnt rubber all over the asphalt. Unfortunately, this driving spectacle as short lived as it was exciting. It may have been a suspension coil or axle breaking, or even a tire blowing out. Either way, the vehicle, which just scaled the Great Pyramid of Giza, could not handle the new stresses these maneuvers were creating. It wasn't long before Williams lost control of the Warthog and it spun out, slamming into a lightpost and knocking it over like a snapped toothpick. Tarin and Jules were speechless for a second before an arm thrust out of the driver's seat giving them the thumbs up, signifying that Williams was at least still alive.

"Not exactly one the smartest things you ever did." Tarin said as she pulled Williams out of the Warthog.

"Worth it, in my opinion." Williams was grinning like a kid who had gotten what he wished for Christmas. "Let's put her out of her misery."

"What are you going to do?" Jules asked.

"Jules, have you ever made a Molotov cocktail?" Williams asked.

"Uh, no. What are those?"

"Basically homemade incendiary grenades." Tarin said matter of factly. "Really simple. All you have to do is have a container of flammable liquid, a cloth, and some kind of ignition source."

"Got it right here." Williams took out some glass bottles that they had obtained from the garbage. "We filled these up with gasoline from the spare tank. Now all we have to do is light themâ€¦"

Williams fumbled around his pockets until he managed to find the one holding his lighter. He then flicked it several times before getting a flame and igniting the strips of cloth jammed into the bottle necks.

"Is thisâ€¦safe?" Jules asked as he picked up one of the homemade weapons.

"Of course not! That's what makes them interesting." Williams picked up his own flaming bottle. "Just aim for the Warthog and throw. That's all there is to it."

Jules nodded and threw his bottle first. It fell a bit short, smashing at the foot of the front right tire. The smell of melting rubber filled the air as the gasoline ignited. Williams' bottle landed on the hood while Tarin's landed directly into the driver's seat with perfect accuracy. It wasn't long until the fire reached the Warthog's onboard fuel tank and the entire vehicle burst into flame.

"Now, if anybody asks us, the official story is that a bunch of kids managed to sneak into the factory, steal the Warthog, and do all kinds of shit with it." Williams said as the Warthog burned in the night. "There's really no way they can't believe us."

"Of course not." Tarin nodded.

The three pranksters stared at the fire for several more seconds. Williams caught the look in Jules' eyes and sighed. "Okay, because you wanted to do it so much." He then unholstered his M6D pistol and handed it to Jules. "Okay, here's a quick rundown. Here's the scope, that's the safety, this is the magazine release, and this is the chamber. It's basically point and shoot."

Jules could not express his feelings in words. He just held the weapon in his hands for a few seconds, savoring the moment. Then he emptied the entire clip into the flaming Warthog. "Nice." He smiled.

"Pretty good for a first timer." Williams laughed. "I know some Marines who can't even hit a sitting Warthog at all."

"You know, I've been wondering." Jules returned Williams' sidearm. "Why'd you do all this? I mean, I know you just wanted to show me a good time, but you two could really get in big trouble for stuff like this."

"Like I said, I just wanted to show you that not all Marines are stuck up, fun-hating jerks." Williams responded.

"Plus, I think you just remind us a bit of ourselves when we were young." Tarin added in. "We've all lost something in this war. Homes, friends, familyâ€¦ the only difference is that the war passed by before it could fully drag you in."

"I guessâ€¦"

"Trust me." Tarin said sadly as she remembered watching her homeworld burn. "At least there's the chance that your family is still out there. Not many people are that lucky."

****Morning****

Williams was incredibly sore by the time he woke up. Due to last night's events, he had only gotten about two to three hours of sleep. He and Tarin had dropped off Jules at one of the nicer refugee camps they could find. They then managed to find a hotel still in operation and rented a room for the night. He yawned and managed to will himself out of his bed. He then rubbed his eyes and saw Tarin entering the room with a bag full of pastries.

"You cannot believe how hard it was to find a decent bakery around

here." Tarin placed the bag on a nearby table and slumped down in a chair, also clearly fatigued by last night's events.

"I suppose we'd better get ready to leave then." Williams sighed and crammed a pastry into his mouth."

"You sound a bit disappointed."

"Well yeah, it was nice to have a bit of free time."

"True." Tarin nodded. "I suppose once we get back the Major is going to work us into the ground."

"Uh huh. You think we should track down Jules?" Williams sighed. "We could be wrong about him."

"Don't be silly. You and I both clearly know what he's trying to pull off." Tarin said, making sure her sidearm was loaded. "You wouldn't want his life hanging onto your conscience now, do you?"

"No, not really."

****Unknown Location****

Jules shuffled nervously into the dark, seemingly abandoned warehouse. He had half a mind to just listen to that little voice in his head and back out, but he had risked too much stealing that item and smuggling it here to just throw it away. He wasn't exactly sure what the strange hunk of alien metal in his backpack was, or why it was so valuable, but he knew that there were a lot of people willing to pay a fortune for it.

However, he couldn't help but feel a little bad for lying to Tarin and Williams. Unlike what he had said earlier, he actually knew where his family was at, but hadn't bothered with reuniting with them just yet. He had grown to enjoy his newfound independence and wanted to use it to try and get somewhere rather than ending up as a dock worker like his father. Plus, the two Marines were also pretty useful in making sure that those scavengers he stole the artifact from wouldn't try to chase him until the time of the deal came. On the other hand, Jules genuinely enjoyed that wild night of wanton insanity and mayhem.

"I see you've finally arrived." A man in a rather expensive looking suit emerged from the shadows, straightening his tie. "So what business would a boy like have with a man like me?"

"I â€"I have something that might interest you." Jules stuttered nervously and took the artifact out of his pack, showing it to the man.

"Interesting." The man's eyes glittered as they scanned the alien object. "I would have paid a very good price for that item. Unfortunately, it turns out that some of my associates were supposed to obtain that very same item for a _substantially_ lower price, but it was stolen from them by a certain young manâ€"|"

A dark pit in Jules' stomach suddenly formed when he realized what was happening. He backed away as the three scavengers from the previous day emerged from the shadows behind the man.

"Heh, teaches you to try and steal from us, you little punk." The leader gave a malicious grin. "But there aren't any Marines around to save you now."

****Derelict Warehouse Entrance****

"You're sure this is the place." Williams looked at the rather run down building that was supposed to be a warehouse.

"Positive. That tracker I planted on him should still be working." Tarin jumped out of the Warthog and made her way to the side door. "Come on."

Williams sighed and turned off the engine. He then leapt out of the vehicle and followed Tarin's lead. As they approached the side door, Williams could see a rather burly looking man standing guard in front of it like a nightclub bouncer. Without a second thought, Tarin merely kept walking towards him. Fortunately, (or unfortunately, depending on your point of view) Tarin and Williams were wearing normal street clothes rather than their standard Marine fatigues. The bouncer gave Tarin a cursory glance, scanning her jacket, shirt, and desert khaki pants.

"Huh, that's odd, I don't remember the Boss ordering any hookers." The bouncer said curiously.

Now, Williams wasn't sure if what happened next was because of Tarin's righteous indignation about saving Jules' life, or because she was offended by why the bouncer said. Either way, Williams mentally noted to herself to never refer to Tarin as a hooker, especially seeing the results firsthand.

With a rather unsettling smile on her face, Tarin whipped her right elbow out, smashing it straight into the bouncer's chest. The burly man was caught off guard and stunned as all the air was shoved out of his lungs. Tarin then swiftly spun him around, pinned his head against the wall, and brought her combat knife out so that the point was pressing against the man's kidneys.

"Now," Tarin said in a sickeningly sweet tone, "could you please open the door for us? I hate for a big strong man like you to lose some ratherâ€¦ important parts."

The bouncer, now clearly intimidated, swiftly inputted a code into the keypad next the door. The keypad beeped and the door swung open.

"Thank you." Tarin struck the bouncer in the back of the head with the hilt of her knife, knocking him out cold. She then turned to Williams and said, "Let's go."

By the time they reached the interior of the warehouse, they could already see Jules being accosted by the three men from yesterday, and another well-dressed man standing the background watching. Intending to stop everything before the situation spiraled out of control, Tarin drew a submachine gun from the duffel bag she was carrying and fired a burst into the far wall, catching everybody's attention. She then grabbed another submachine gun and kept it trained on the well-dressed man while focusing the other on one of the thugs.

Williams kept the other two thugs covered with his battle rifle.

"Tarin! Williams!" Jules yelled in surprise.

"Okay, I have no idea who the hell you people are, but here is how things are going down." Tarin said, her guns still trained on their targets. She nodded to Jules. "You give them back whatever you stole from them, free of charge." She then looked at the well-dressed man. "And in return, you'll guarantee that you'll leave this kid alone and that you won't let anybody bother him again. Those are my terms, and they're non-negotiable, so you'd better decide quickly."

"Boss?" One of the thugs looked at the well-dressed man like a dog seeking orders from its master. "Don't let this bitch boss us around!"

"Hold up." The well-dressed man held out a finger to shush the thug. "Let me pass this through my supervisor."

Tarin and Williams watched warily as the well-dressed man pulled a cell phone out of his pocket, dialed in a number, and held the device to his ear.

"Hello? Yes, this is a secure line." The well-dressed man turned away from Tarin. "Well, we've hit a bit of a snag. I'm sure you're aware of the current situation. I'm just asking for some confirmation on what you intend to do about it." The well-dressed man stood there for a few more seconds, nodded, and pocketed the phone. "Well, it seems as if my supervisor has reached a decision."

"And?" Tarin's finger on the trigger tightened slightly.

"Let them go." The well-dressed man said. "After they return the artifact."

"But boss!" One of the thugs began to complain.

"No arguments." The well-dressed man said harshly.

Jules looked to Tarin. Tarin just nodded, which prompted Jules to reach into his pack and bring out a small hunk of alien metal. He looked at it for several brief seconds before tossing it to the well-dressed man, who caught it out of the air with little effort. Jules then ran and took cover behind Tarin and Williams. The thugs made a move to chase, but stopped under the discouraging eye of the well-dressed man. Satisfied that they weren't going to pursue, Tarin, Williams, and Jules beat a hasty retreat.

"Well, thank you, gentlemen. Your services are no longer necessary." The well-dressed man smiled and handed them each an envelope. "Here is the compensation for your troubles, all in cash. I'd also like to request that you mention nothing of today's events to anybody outside this warehouse."

The thugs half nodded and rushed out of the warehouse, undoubtedly excited to spend the money stuffed inside those envelopes. With the deed done, and the artifact safely in his possession, the well-dressed man took out his phone again and hit the "redial" button.

"The groceries have been picked up and are on their way. Oh yeah, and you were right about her. They really do have quite a lot in common, especially the eyes."

****Undisclosed Location****

"Ah, that's good news." Ryan Hubbard smiled. "Just make sure things go smoothly."

"Who was that?" Shannon asked absentmindedly as Ryan hung up his phone. "More business?"

"You could say that." Ryan shrugged.

"Even after the Director himself ordered you to get a vacation?" Shannon poked Ryan in the ribs. "That's really not very nice of you."

"Think of it as a side job." Ryan smiled and took a swig from his water bottle as he trudged along under the unforgiving African sun. "Besides, it's been all taken care of."

"Better have been." Shannon pouted. "With all that work the Director's been throwing around, you how lucky it was for us that he decided to give us a few days off?"

"Hey, what can I say, I like what I do." Ryan bent down in front of the small plate of titanium A. The lone monument stood apart from the desolation, honoring those that died to defend Earth from the Covenant. Ryan bent down and noticed there were already a plethora of pictures, graffiti, and memorabilia covering the monument. Ryan added to the collection by placing a small tin figure of a Marine on the ground before the monument. The tin soldier had once belonged to the son of one of the Director's acquaintances. The Director personally requested that while he was down here, that Ryan at least take the time to visit the monument to leave behind the offering. Besides, Ryan had something of his own to leave behind. He took out a small photograph of himself and his younger brother Edward.

"Is that-" Shannon started to speak.

"Yeah, brave fellow finally got the guts to venture out of his room." Ryan smiled sadly. "It's too bad he never got the chance to tell me in person though."

Ryan wasn't sure how long he had stood there in front of that monument, but it was already getting dark when he finally looked away from it. He briefly considered going back home. Actually, that didn't seem like a bad idea at all.

****Cairo****

"So how long did you know? Jules asked curiously as the Warthog sped through the streets.

"The first time we met you." Tarin responded simply. "We had our suspicions at first, and they were pretty much confirmed after we sneaked a peek in your pack."

"Then why didn't you just take it yourselves? What all that crazy stuff that night?"

"Like I said." Williams said, "We just wanted to show you us Marines can have a good time. Plus, we were kinda hoping that you would realize the error of your ways and admit it yourself."

"Obviously, you didn't do that so we had to bail you out ourselves." Tarin reached into Jules' pack and pulled out a small electronic chip. "We had a GPS tracker on you the whole time."

"So, am I in trouble?" Jules asked nervously.

"Well," Tarin cocked her head to the side, "nobody really got hurt, and there's little proof that anything actually happened. Plus, I'm not sure those other guys are too keen on talking about what happened there either. You'll be fine. However, I do have one thing to say to you."

"What is it?"

"You're a smart kid, Jules. Anybody who can guide a bunch of scavengers into the ruins of Voi, find an artifact, steal it from them, and try to sell it themselves is no mean feat. However, you're better off putting those smarts to something worthwhile, like a more legitimate way to earn your income. Don't throw your life away just because you want a bit of excitement."

"What she said." Williams nodded sagely.

"I- I don't know what to say." Jules said, genuinely exhausted.

"How about 'thank you'?" Williams hit the brakes and stopped the Warthog. "We've also taken the time to track down your family. You'll find them waiting for you in that camp right there."

There could have been many things for Jules to say. He stood there on the sidewalk for several minutes before asking, "Will I ever see you again?"

"Depends on the path you take." Tarin said.

And with that, the Warthog engine roared and the vehicle and its occupants disappeared into the Egyptian dusk. Jules couldn't help but smile before sauntering off into the refugee camp.

****Airport****

Tarin and Williams stepped into the Pelican and were somewhat surprised to see a familiar face at the helm.

"Barfbag?" Williams said incredulously as he saw the cursed Pelican pilot sitting in the pilot's seat. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Funny story, really." Barfbag grinned. "Crytech needed to have this Pelican delivered, but one of their pilots called in sick, so, the only other certified Pelican pilot around here was me. They pretty much drafted me into making sure this thing gets to where it's

supposed to in one piece."

"Why am I not encouraged by this fact?" Williams sighed.

"Don't worry. The last thing I'd want is to crash in the Atlantic Ocean." Barfbag smiled. "Besides, if I fall asleep in the seat, I've always got the copilot to take care of things for me."

"Hi!" Vesper said cheerfully as she spun the seat around.

"What's she doing here?" Tarin pointed to the Hornet pilot.

"That's a long story too. We basically got pissed drunk, watched some dirty movies, and did a few other things. Coincidentally, I'm reconsidering my decision to leave the military." Barfbag seemed to be in a much happier mood than he was usually in.

"Right, I'll take your word for it." Williams said, not wishing to press the topic any further. He had his suspicions anyways.

"I suppose you're not dragging anybody along with you?" Barfbag asked.

"No."

"Good, then we can get the hell out of this damn sandbowl." Barfbag enthusiastically flipped several switches and began powering up the engines. "I hope I don't have to remind you to buckle up your restraints and keep your arms and legs inside the vehicle at all times."

With that, the Pelican slowly lifted off from the pad and sped off into the distance. Nobody on the ground noticed or cared. It was just one of many that day that flew in and out of the airport. It was nothing special.

****Straits of Gibraltar****

It had been a quiet trip up to that point. Tarin and Williams had taken the opportunity to catch up on their sleep. After all, they were going to need all the strength they could muster when they reported back for duty under the Major. A bit of turbulence rocked the Pelican, prompting Williams to open his eyes. He blinked rapidly to clear up his blurred vision and saw that Tarin's head was snuggled up against his shoulder. Williams fought the urge to panic and realized that he was staring. It was at this moment that Tarin woke up as well and straightened up, seemingly not noticing what was happening.

"Are we there yet?" Tarin asked.

"Not even close." Barfbag replied. "Just took off from a refueling pad in Algiers so we should have more than enough fuel to cross the ocean. It'll probably take a few more hours."

"Damn, and I thought it would've been a short ride, too." Tarin sighed and leaned back in her seat. "You know, yesterday, you asked me a question. You asked me if there was something I always wanted to doâ€¦"

"And?"

"Well, I was wondering." Tarin shuffled around nervously. "Was there something that you have always wanted to do?"

"Wellâ€¦"

It came as rather a surprise at first, but Tarin didn't feel angry or outraged when she felt Williams' lips press against hers. The kiss lasted for only a few brief seconds, and Tarin was left wishing that it would have been longer than that.

"How long have you been wanting to that?" Tarin asked.

"Ever since I saw you naked." Williams gave a sloppy grin.

"Pervert." Tarin cracked a smile and lightly punched Williams in the arm. "Actually, I kinda lied about my answer to your question yesterday."

Williams was about to ask her about that when her lips made contact with his. Unlike his kiss, this one stayed considerably longer before Tarin broke it off, mainly so she could catch her breath.

"So you wanted the same thing I did?" Williams asked.

"Actually, no, that was just to return the favor." Tarin smiled. "What I really wanted was to know your first name."

Williams gave a quick, suspicious glance to the cockpit. Barfbag and Vesper were too busy working the controls to pay attention to them. He then whispered something inaudible to all expect himself and Tarin. A few seconds later, Tarin burst into laughter.

"So that's why you never say it!"

"Say what?" Barfbag craned his head. "Something wrong?"

"Uh, nothing. Wasn't talking to you."

"Whatever." Barfbag shrugged and returned to the controls.

"You know, what if the Major finds out about this?" Tarin asked.

"Ah, she won't do anything. She can't anyways, since she's stuck in the same situation as us."

"True." Tarin nodded and laid her head against Williams' shoulder again. "You'll have to tell me how you got such an absurd name someday."

"Someday." Williams nodded.

"Wake me up when we get there."

"Sure."

Suffice to say, it was a long, but fantastically rewarding, journey

back.

End
file.